and I have nothing better to do right now. The men will protect us. Dray, the Speaker also needs help." She unzipped the front seam of her coverall to give Spock more benefit of her warmth and reached across his waist to Beth's. She wasn't about to let it show in her voice, but her eyes were smarting and her throat salty with tears. Spock was a decent person. Whatever they had beaten him with had left furrows where the flesh was ripped away. His entire back was one green-black bruise, and she suspected broken ribs. It was entirely obvious that the wounds continued below his waist. If it had been Kirk she would have stripped him, dignity or no. She could feel welts and the warmth of more blood where her thighs touched Spock's, but he had endured enough for one day. Damn and double damn all pirates and Romulans everywhere.

Dray moved to assist the Speaker without protest. He dressed the burns competently enough, in control of himself now that it was not Spock.

"They tortured you, sir?"

"Only enough to impress me with their lack of respect for my person. They had no use for me dead It enabled me to convince them to cut off communications with their ship and send it out of danger. That is why their commander needed to know when the Enterprise would return. Much as they want the Weilda, they did not want to die. I did not draw you into their trap out of treachery. With the two ships safe, I hoped you could free me."

"You freed us, sir," Hillis pointed out. "You had the weapon and the bolt hole?"

"Without aid I dared not use them. This river flows into the Throat of Fire--ah--" he tensed and the Guthrie finished more gently. "The Romulans will not, I think, call their ship unless yours returns. If your First Officer told them--"

"He told them nothing," said T'serek.

The Speaker inspected the boy closely. "I appreciate your loyalty, but perhaps--when he awakens we should ask him."

"We don't need to ask him," Hillis said quietly, without looking up from the river.

The Speaker looked from the alert posture of the guards to where the two women lay with Spock. Different worlds, different customs. On his world, women were to bear children.

"I intended no offense. I, also, must request this information. The time remaining is the time before your ship returns."

"Why is the return of the Enterprise so important?" Clement asked, ignoring the improper, typical ly primitive concept that the duration of a journey depended merely on distance.

"Your ship," said the Speaker, "has the capability of destroying this planet."

Nadia felt a chill run down her spine that was not the damp breath of the river, and simultaneously felt a new tension in Spock's body. The Vulcan had not roused to defend or support the men's assertion of his silence, but Goren held his interest now. The Speaker nodded and matter of factly pulled a blanket around his shoulders.

"Now comes a history lesson. lest you tell yourselves this old man is wandering in his mind. You will have heard that our world is not like most. It was altered, some thirty thousand of your years ago, made suitable for life. The Ixmahx are that life. And we have maintained a coherent history of all that time. We understand few worlds can claim as much."

Nadia tried to feel the depth of that much time--time for grasslands to grow forests, time for mountains to shift in their slow sleep, for coastlines to redefine a continent.

"For several millenia after settlement there was a program of rapid expansion--population and the construction of cities. It was enforced by the speakers of the past, who were worshipped as gods and had godlike powers. According to your standards, it was a reign of absolute despotism and terror. The source of the speakers' powers was an aftifact of the seeding civilization. It was called the Wielda Harfax, the Crown of Light, and for nine thousand years, every ruler assumed the Crown at his coronation and wore it until his death. But the people it oppressed rebelled, and a faction stole the Wielda between the death of one speaker and its assumption by another. By the time of its recovery, four Speakers had ruled without it. The Speaker who next assumed it was aged. For that reason, or perhaps because he had grown old with a free mind, it killed him. And his son would not wear it. The Wielda was preserved as a holy, but fearful relic. A containment was made for it, from which it called, always, to the speaker, promising wealth, length of life, and power. Two others have assumed it, in times of great need, and although they were well-meaning men, always its power turned to evil. Finally it was put away for all time. That was in the year 15, 864.

"From that day until this Ixmahx has known slow progress, no war, little poverty--and little ambition. We have seen your accounts of other worlds, with their explosive growth; we do not envy them. It was a difficult decision to enlist your aid."

Spock lifted his head, stirring between Nadia and Sunderson. "It must have been a great need that prompted such an action, Speaker."

"Yes, First Officer. The Crown has again been stolen. You understand, it was history, almost legend to us. At first we did not know. When we began to suspect what had happened we tried to move against it ourselves and failed. The Romulans came to us and pressed us with offers of their aid, as did the Federation. We chose you. They are a people who desire without moderation."

"What damage has the artifact actually done?" persisted Spock.

"In the beginning, it tried to influence my thoughts. It was vile. When it could not do that, and I reported it to my councilors, there began to be waves of senseless murders--then assasinations not so senseless. The government of a city and finally a province was disrupted. Refugees fled in a state of shock, speaking of things that should not exist. When we forced our way in we found the people in hiding, afraid of us, of each other, their minds permanently damaged. There was no attempt to retake the city, but there were new waves of terror. People fear being alone, fear the dark. We are close to seeing our civilization fail because of fear."

"You believe all this to have been done by one man in possession of a single artifact?"

"No--we know of cases where innocent citizens have committed atrocities--I believe that one